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Published Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

James, Simon P. (2013) 'Philistinism and the preservation of nature.', *Philosophy*, 88 (1). pp. 101-114.

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000575>

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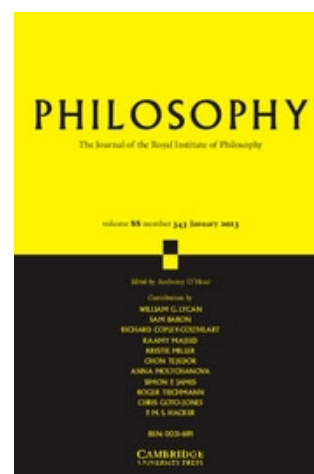
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Philistinism and the Preservation of Nature

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Philosophy / Volume 88 / Issue 01 / January 2013, pp 101 - 114

DOI: 10.1017/S0031819112000575, Published online: 04 January 2013

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0031819112000575

How to cite this article:

Simon P. James (2013). Philistinism and the Preservation of Nature. *Philosophy*, 88, pp 101-114 doi:10.1017/S0031819112000575

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Philistinism and the Preservation of Nature

SIMON P. JAMES

Abstract

It is clear that natural entities can be preserved – they can be preserved because they can be harmed or destroyed, or in various other ways adversely affected. I argue that in light of the rise of scientism and other forms of philistinism, the political, religious, mythic, personal and historical meanings that people find in those entities can also be preserved. Against those who impugn disciplines such as fine arts, philosophy and sociology, I contend that this sort of preservation requires the efforts of those whose work exemplifies the core values of the arts, the humanities and the qualitative social sciences.

Not all environmentalists believe that our first priority should be to *preserve* nature. Some think that we should set our sights on some other target, such as the active transformation of natural systems.¹ And even those who do focus their energies on preservation frequently disagree about which natural entities should be preserved, about why they should be preserved, and about what should be done to preserve them. Yet despite these differences of opinion, it is widely acknowledged that nature *can* be preserved. It can be preserved because it can be adversely affected in various ways – hunted to extinction, denuded of vegetation, stripped of topsoil, and so forth – and because some of these effects can be prevented.

In *The History of the Countryside*, Oliver Rackham has much to say about these kinds of effects.² In particular, he notes how, over the centuries and especially since 1945, much of Britain's natural heritage

¹ See, e.g., the essays by Frederick Turner and William R. Jordan in A. D. Baldwin, Jr., J. de Luce, and C. Pletsch (eds), *Beyond Preservation: Restoring and Inventing Landscapes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

² *The History of the Countryside: the classic history of Britain's landscape, flora and fauna* (London: Phoenix Press, 1986).

has been lost.³ That observation has been made by others of course, yet Rackham's case is distinctive in that it does not focus exclusively on the various physical entities – fauna, flora, habitats, etc. – that have disappeared from the British Isles. He claims that he is also concerned – in fact 'specially concerned' – with the 'loss of meaning' that has accompanied these physical changes.⁴ Thus in one passage Rackham criticises the policy of only planting trees of officially approved strains, selected for their commercial value. 'A world in which all oaks or ashes are genetically selected', he writes, 'will have lost much of the meaning and beauty of oak and ash'.⁵ He objects, on similar grounds, to the thoughtless and indiscriminate planting of trees. To plant lime trees throughout the British Isles is, he maintains, to occlude the 'meaning' embodied in the 'mysterious natural distribution' of the tree.⁶ The horse chestnut has, similarly, been 'deprived of its meaning through being made the universal tree of bus-stations'.⁷

More would need to be said to explain how the terms 'nature', 'meaning' and 'loss' are to be understood in this context (and I shall address these matters below). But for present purposes, it will suffice to note that Rackham's general claim – if not, perhaps, all of his judgements about specific cases – would seem, at first sight, to be plausible. It would indeed seem that nature's meanings are like wetlands and waterfowl – and unlike, say, abstract objects such as the number five – in that they can disappear. It would appear that nature's meanings can be lost.

Environmental thinkers have had much to say about which parts of nature should be preserved and why, but they have had comparatively little to say about this kind of loss, the loss of nature's meanings. This, I suggest, is to be regretted, for just as natural entities can be harmed, eradicated, etc., so in many post-industrial liberal democracies nature's general 'meaningfulness' is currently threatened by the rise of various forms of philistinism. In light of these tendencies, it is,

³ In what follows, I focus on the natural history of Britain. I do this simply because I am familiar with this topic, and not because I believe that my argument only applies to the wildlife, natural habitats, etc. of a small group of islands in the North Atlantic. On the contrary, my case applies to wildlife, etc. generally, regardless of its geographical location.

⁴ Op. cit. note 2, 26.

⁵ Op. cit. note 2, 247.

⁶ Op. cit. note 2, 29; cf. O. Rackham, *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape: The Complete History of Britain's Trees, Woods & Hedgerows* (Revised edition) (London: Phoenix Press, 1990), 204.

⁷ Op. cit. note 2, 54.

Philistinism and the Preservation of Nature

I contend, possible to preserve the historical, mythic, religious, personal and political meanings that people find in the natural world. This sort of preservation requires the efforts of those whose work exemplifies the core values of the arts and humanities, and (assuming that anti-positivists such as Dilthey and Weber are correct)⁸ the qualitative social sciences too. Hence, if it is well taken, the argument I develop provides one response to those who wonder what contribution those in disciplines such as history, philosophy and sociology might be able to make to the preservation of nature.

1.

I begin, not with the various philosophical issues indicated by talk of nature and meaning, but by considering a distinctive approach to natural history, one exemplified by television programmes such as the BBC's *Birds Britannica* and books such as Richard Mabey's *Flora Britannica* and Mark Cocker's *Birds Britannica*.⁹

The first thing that may be noted about the works of the *Britannica* series and the sort of natural history they exemplify will seem obviously true to many and highly contentious to some: they are about *nature*.¹⁰ This is evidently not nature in the theologian's sense. It is true that Mabey et al. do not concern themselves with angels, ghosts and other supernatural entities; however, their interests are not so broad as to encompass everything that is not supernatural. Nor, as we shall see, are works like *Flora Britannica* and *Birds Britannica* about nature as opposed to culture. Rather, they are about nature in what might be called the naturalist's or natural historian's

⁸ Defending that contentious assumption is beyond the scope of this paper. For an introduction to the relevant issues, see David E. Cooper, *Meaning* (Chesham: Acumen, 2003), Chapter 5.

⁹ E.g., R. Mabey, *Flora Britannica* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1996); M. Cocker and R. Mabey, *Birds Britannica* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2005). See also: R. Mabey, *Nature Cure* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2005); Mabey, *Beechcombings: The narratives of trees* (London: Vintage, 2007); Mabey, *Weeds: A cultural history* (London: Profile Books, 2010a); Mabey, *A Brush with Nature* (London: Random House, 2010b); P. Marren and R. Mabey, *Bugs Britannica* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2010); S. Buczacki, *Fauna Britannica* (London: Hamlyn, 2005).

¹⁰ Steven Vogel is one writer who would dispute the claim that the *Britannica* works are about nature. See his defence of 'postnaturalism' in 'Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature', *Environmental Ethics* 24 (spring 2002), 23–39.

sense, which is to say that they focus on nonhuman organisms and the ecological communities to which they belong.¹¹ The purview of these works is, however, wider than that of some works of natural history. For although Mabey et al. are not much concerned with those entities, like combustion engines and flat-screen TVs, whose current states tend to be almost entirely the intended results of human actions, they do not restrict their attention to those parts of the biosphere that have been largely unaffected by human beings. So they are concerned, not merely with wild organisms and their habitats, but with entities that, although not 'entirely instrumentalized by human artifice', as David Wiggins puts it, have nonetheless been extensively shaped by human actions.¹²

The second noteworthy feature of the works in the *Britannica* series is that their primary aim is not to communicate specialist scientific knowledge but to convey the various *meanings* natural entities have for people. Thus Mabey writes of the meanings plants have 'as tokens of birth, death, harvest and celebration, and omens of good (and bad) luck', and as 'emblems of place and identity... not just of nations, but of villages, neighbourhoods, even personal retreats'.¹³ For instance, he explains that rowan trees (*Sorbus aucuparia*), the slender, berry-bearing trees familiar from suburban streets, were traditionally planted as a protection against evil; that the common poppy (*Papaver rhoeas*) was thought to symbolise 'growth, blood and new life' even in ancient times, and long before John McCrae's poem of 1915; that ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) was traditionally regarded as a healing tree, and that in an ancient ceremony ailing children would be ritually passed through a young tree split down the middle and held open with wedges.¹⁴

¹¹ True, 'Nature is what naturalists study' would not be a satisfactory definition. But it is not my intention, here, to define nature. My aim is simply to convey a general sense of what I am referring to when I use the term 'nature'. Furthermore, although in what follows I refer to natural 'entities', I do not mean to suggest that naturalists are exclusively concerned with *things*. On the contrary, they are typically concerned with a variety of ontological categories – not just things, but processes, for instance, and events. For a more detailed account of these issues, see Douglas J. Buege, 'An Ecologically-informed Ontology for Environmental Ethics', *Biology and Philosophy* **12** (1997), 1–20.

¹² 'The Presidential Address: Nature, Respect for Nature, and the Human Scale of Values', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* **100** (2000), 1–32, at 10.

¹³ Mabey 1996, op. cit. note 9, 7.

¹⁴ Mabey 1996, op. cit. note 9, 203, 50–1, 326. Cf. Buczacki, op. cit. note 9, 196, on the old belief that ash trees repel snakes.

Philistinism and the Preservation of Nature

It is true that the meanings referred to by Mabey et al. are not all alike. For one thing, they must be gauged in relation to a variety of contexts. While one plant might have meaning in relation to certain political ideals, the meaning of another might indicate a certain set of religious teachings and practices. What is more, this relation can take a variety of forms. An entity might have meaning by *expressing* some mood or emotion, or by *alluding* to some historical event; alternatively, its meaning might be a function of its *associations* with love, say, or death.¹⁵ Furthermore, to provide a full account of the meaning of any natural entity, one must identify the constituency of subjects for whom the entity in question has meaning. But these complexities need not detain us here. For now, it is enough to note that works like *Flora* are about the many ways that natural entities make sense (or fail to make sense) to people in the living of their lives. On this broad conception of meaning, they are about nature's meanings.¹⁶

The third thing that may be noted about the *Britannica* books is that they might seem, in one sense and to some extent, to have preserved nature. This is not to say that they have indirectly helped to preserve certain natural entities – by inspiring environmentalists, for instance – though they might well have done that. It is to suggest that they have directly preserved at least some of nature's meanings. After all, many

¹⁵ On these different relations – expressive, allusive and associative, respectively – see Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 113–22.

¹⁶ In philosophical logic and philosophy of language, the main focus is on the meanings of linguistic items such as sentences, rather than the meanings of non-linguistic items such as gestures, rituals or natural entities. In what follows, however, I adopt a conception of meaning which accords more closely with the way that term – and related English words, such as 'significance' – are used in ordinary discourse. That strategy would be criticised by some writers, including Dan Sperber, but it has been defended by several others, including Thomas E. Hill and David E. Cooper (see Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 8–9; Hill, *The Concept of Meaning* (London: Routledge, 1971), v; Cooper, op. cit. note 8, Chapter 1). Cooper, for his part, argues that to explain the meaning of any 'thing' is to show how it is 'appropriate' to 'what is either larger than or outside itself' (where 'appropriateness' is conceived as a kind of normative, rather than causal, relation), and this enables him to consider the meanings of a wide variety of 'things', including gestures, rituals and even what Dilthey called 'Life' itself. I merely mention Cooper's position in passing since there is insufficient space, here, to provide a detailed account, still less a defence, of it. In any case, the argument set out in the rest of the paper does not presuppose the truth of Cooper's account, so rejecting it need not compel one to reject the argument.

of the meanings Mabey discusses count as folklore and, like other items of folklore, many of them are in danger of being lost. With the gradual passing of the generations and the transformation of rural life, it is likely that many of the 'folk' meanings described in *Flora* and other such works will disappear. So while Mabey is rightly aware of the dangers of unreflective nostalgia, it might seem that *Flora* is, at least to some extent, a work of preservation.¹⁷ It is true that it has not directly prevented any plants from being harmed or killed. (In fact its high print run might have resulted in a large number of them being pulped.) But it might have saved some of nature's meanings from being lost, and that might seem to be preservation of a sort.

2.

To clarify: I am employing the terms 'nature' and 'the natural world' – which I will use interchangeably – to denote the distinctive subject matter of natural history. Furthermore, I have stipulated that to refer to the meanings of an entity is to refer to the ways that it makes sense to or has significance for people. And finally, interpreting 'nature' and 'meaning' in these ways, I have mooted the suggestion that nature's meanings can be preserved.

Is this suggestion plausible? Writers such as Mabey have certainly had a great deal to say about the archaic meanings that have been attributed to nature, the fact that certain kinds of organism were once regarded as protections from evil, say, or as symbols of religious truths. Yet although they have evidently managed to record those meanings, it is not clear that they have managed to *preserve* any of them. Perhaps, to be sure, works such as *Flora* have been able to preserve some of those meanings as museum pieces, comforting curiosities for modern-day nature lovers. But they are unlikely to have preserved them as they were once *lived*. For instance, twenty-first century nature lovers can read Mabey's account of the healing rituals associated with ash trees, noting, in a cool, detached sort of way, that their rural forebears might once have taken those trees to have had certain meanings. But they cannot live those meanings in the way that they were once lived by those who took the power of sympathetic magic for granted. As William James would have said, those meanings cannot become 'hot and alive' for them.¹⁸ Indeed, more

¹⁷ See Mabey 1996, op. cit. note 9, 7–8.

¹⁸ See *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 163.

Philistinism and the Preservation of Nature

generally, it is clearly not feasible to preserve all of the meanings our forebears saw in nature, for to preserve many of them one would need to preserve (or revive) the forms of life in which those meanings have (or had) their proper homes, and in the vast majority of cases this would be to struggle, futilely, against the tide of history.

How then are we to judge those who claim to have preserved nature's meanings? When the meanings in question are archaic, then they may simply be fooling themselves. It may not be possible for them to recover a pre-modern vision of the world. In some cases, in fact, the meanings the would-be preservers take themselves to be preserving might be of recent provenance and so not archaic at all.¹⁹ A wish to preserve nature's meanings could, for example, reflect a mistaken belief that there was once an age of 'Merrie England' in which good country folk lived in contented harmony with each other and with the land. Since this world has only ever existed in fantasy novels, Sunday evening comedy dramas and the like, its meanings can be neither preserved nor restored, and any attempt to do either is likely to indicate a nostalgic longing for a past that never was.

In many instances, then, it will not be clear that nature's meanings *can* be preserved. And even if it is feasible to preserve some of nature's meanings, it is a further question whether such efforts should be welcomed. Certainly, with the passing of time, some of nature's meanings have become vulnerable to loss. In many of these cases, however, the prospect of loss need not be regarded as a bad outcome, still less one that there are reasons, moral or otherwise, to avoid. Take the ancient tendency to demonise certain animals.²⁰ Meanings of this sort resurface from time to time in stories of baby-snatching urban foxes and the like, but there is surely no reason to preserve them. Such superstitions we could well do without. Or, to give another example, consider early modern, European views of mountains. In *The Sacred Theory of the Earth*, Thomas Burnet conjectured that the smooth surface of the newly created earth had been broken by the Great Flood, leaving the 'shapeless and ill-figur'd' heaps of rock that we now know as mountains.²¹

¹⁹ On the recent provenance of many 'traditions', see E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds) *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

²⁰ See, e.g., Buczacki (op. cit. note 9) on yellowhammers (180), swifts (311), swallows (321) and magpies (359–60).

²¹ Quoted in M. H. Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetic of the Infinite* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1959), 210.

For Burnet, then, mountains were ‘Ruins of a broken world’, or, as Robert Macfarlane puts it, ‘gigantic souvenirs of humanity’s sinfulness’.²² Such views were once popular in intellectual circles – they are prominent, for instance, in the works of John Donne and Andrew Marvell.²³ Yet to twenty-first century thinkers, even twenty-first century theists, they seem to indicate a regrettable inability to see what the Romantics saw, namely the beauty of nature’s irregularity. It is, in any case, no cause for regret that such views are now so unpopular.

3.

In many cases, then, it will not be feasible to preserve the meanings that were once attributed to nature. Moreover, even when the meanings in question can become ‘hot and alive’ for modern audiences, it is a further question whether they should be preserved. When the meanings evince certain sorts of prejudice there may, in fact, be moral reasons to ensure that they are *not* preserved. Hence it is not clear that we should regard works such as *Flora* as valuable exercises in meaning-preservation.

Yet one must take care not to infer too much from this, for the meanings discussed in *Flora* and other such works are not all bizarre and archaic.²⁴ Although Mabey, Cocker et al. often appeal to historical sources, many of the meanings they discuss can be readily grasped by modern readers. As Mabey explains:

[W]hat we have found in the field research for *Flora Britannica*, and in the multitude of public contributions to it, is that Britain still has a lively popular culture of plants. Although wilder superstitions have faded... the ancient engagements between plants, people and places continue unabated.²⁵

Although works such as *Flora* have much to say about history, they do more than simply revive a constellation of strange and ancient superstitions. Instead, they manage to convey the rich variety of meanings that nature still has for us – us twenty-first century readers. They reveal the natural world to be *generally meaningful*, invested, that is,

²² Quoted in *ibid.*, 200. R. Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind: A History of a Fascination* (London: Granta, 2003), 27.

²³ See Nicholson, *op. cit.* note 21, chapter 2.

²⁴ Cf. Cocker and Mabey, *op. cit.* note 9, ix–x.

²⁵ Mabey 1996, *op. cit.* note 9, 9.

Philistinism and the Preservation of Nature

with a range of political, religious, mythic, personal and historical meanings.

In *Flora*, Mabey achieves this by informing his readers of the various meanings that have been found in the natural world; he tells them that certain plants have been taken to have certain meanings. In this respect, *Flora* bears comparison with the works of cultural geographers and environmental historians. Just as Mabey tells his readers about the meanings of plants, so, as we saw, Rackham devotes a significant part of his classic history of the British countryside to expounding the meanings of natural entities.²⁶ Likewise, influential works such as Yi-Fu Tuan's *Topophilia* and Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory* inform their readers about what Schama calls the 'veins of myth and memory' that lie beneath our conventional views of natural landscapes.²⁷

Natural historical, geographical and historical studies tell their readers about nature's meanings; however, meanings can of course be conveyed in other ways, too. Poems, for instance, can express meanings. Whereas a study in natural history might inform the reader that hawks have frequently been regarded as emblems of wildness or that the return of swifts to British skies in May might be taken to symbolise the renewal of summer, a poet like Ted Hughes can express those meanings in verse. Adopting an image from Heidegger's later work, poems like 'Hawk Roosting' and 'Swifts' might be said to 'gather' those meanings.²⁸ Or consider the work of Seamus Heaney. 'Blackberry Picking' does not tell the reader that things seldom live up to our expectations; the story of the rotting berries expresses the point metaphorically. 'Death of a Naturalist' does not tell us that a boy came to regard the froggy population of a local flax-dam as repellent; it expresses this change in meaning.²⁹

Hughes and Heaney work with words; yet nature's meanings can also be expressed through (or in) other artistic media. In some

²⁶ Op. cit. note 2.

²⁷ Y-F. Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perceptions, Attitudes, and Values* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974), S. Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Fontana Press, 1996), 14.

²⁸ See, respectively, *Ted Hughes* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), and *Season Songs* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985). See also the discussion of 'Swifts' at Mabey 2005, op. cit. note 9, 19. On 'gathering', see Heidegger, 'The Thing', in A. Hofstadter (trans.) *Poetry, Language, Thought* (NY: Harper & Row, 1971), 165–86.

²⁹ Both poems are from *Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991).

cases, in fact, the medium may itself be partly natural. Take Andy Goldsworthy's *Hidden Trees*: three huge branches, salvaged from forestry work in a country park and set in a ha-ha. In his discussion of the work, Mabey notes that it 'reveals, in the depths of the ditch, the reality that was hidden: reckless forest clearance, hard human labour'.³⁰ A similar effect could have been achieved by a great poet. Yet while poems are not part of the natural world,³¹ it is not clear that the same holds true of *Hidden Trees*. It consists of three branches sunk into a ditch, surrounded by a dry stone wall but otherwise open to the elements. It expresses nature's meanings. Yet it would not be absurd to think that it is part of nature, at least to some extent.

4.

I do not mean to suggest that the primary, still less the sole, effect of all nature-focused works, from historical studies to land art, is to reveal nature's general meaningfulness. For one thing, the primary effect of some such works is to convey nature's strangeness and 'otherness', and it might reasonably be objected that this is not a revelation of meaningfulness so much as a recognition of the limits of our attempts to find meaning in nature.³² Furthermore, I have not claimed that nature's general meaningfulness can only be revealed through human works such as poems and land art. That claim is false. Like artworks, natural entities often embody their meanings.³³ For this reason, the best way to preserve the historical, political, etc. meanings of an entity will, in many cases, be to preserve the entity, rather than to write poems about it, for example. Indeed I admit

³⁰ Mabey 2010b, op. cit. note 9, 155.

³¹ Excepting, perhaps, those of the T'ang dynasty Buddhist recluse, Han Shan, which were said to have been etched onto cliffs and trees.

³² Thus Robert Macfarlane writes that the frozen shoulders of Ben Hope in the Northwest Highlands of Scotland 'refused any imputation of meaning' (*The Wild Places* (London: Granta, 2007), 157). Against such claims, it could be contended that, like the artworks of Duchamp and Schoenberg, some natural entities have a special significance or meaning precisely because they resist being incorporated into our usual schemes of significance.

³³ On the embodiment of meaning in artworks, see Arthur C. Danto, 'The end of art: A philosophical defence', *History and Theory* 37: 4 (1998), 127–43. See also Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch's discussion of how national flags embody meanings in *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 72–3.

Philistinism and the Preservation of Nature

that much more would need to be said to give a full account of all the different ways that nature can be revealed to be meaningful: about whether the 'revealing' is deliberate or unintentional, inventive or banal; about whether it is achieved through literary devices, sensitive historical research, the preservation of entities, or in some other way. But I will not try to give a full account of these matters here. I have merely suggested that nature can be revealed to be generally meaningful – permeated, that is, with historical, mythic, religious, personal and political significance. And, without going into much detail, I have suggested that this can be achieved through a wide range of human works, from those of writers like Mabey and Annie Dillard to the artworks of individuals such as Goldsworthy and David Nash.

It is one thing to claim that certain works reveal nature to be generally meaningful but quite another to say that any of them *preserve* that meaningfulness, for to say this is to imply that that meaningfulness is under threat, that people are becoming – or are at risk of becoming – insensitive to the historical, mythic, religious and political significance of the natural world. Now if all the world's inhabitants were as perceptive and imaginative as Mabey, Heaney and Goldsworthy, then no such threat would exist, and so nature's meaningfulness could not be preserved. But of course our world, the post-industrial context in which we live our lives, is not like this. True, many people *are* alive to nature's general meaningfulness; no doubt, many of them are becoming more and more aware of the historical, mythic, religious, personal and political meanings of nature. But our world is also marked by certain countervailing tendencies.

Begin by considering the thesis that the natural sciences are our only means of knowing anything that is worth knowing about reality.³⁴ This view seems to be growing in popularity, in part due to support from prominent figures such as Stephen Hawking and Richard Dawkins.³⁵ For its advocates, it must be possible to express anything that is worth knowing about the natural world in terms of causal relations and other scientifically respectable concepts. In cases of what H. P. Grice called 'natural meanings' – when, for instance, it is said that grey clouds mean rain or that a fever means the

³⁴ This is a form of what Mikael Stenmark calls 'axiological scientism'. See his book *Scientism: Science, Ethics and Religion* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 11–3.

³⁵ Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design: New Answers to the Ultimate Questions in Life* (London: Bantam Books, 2010), 13. For evidence of Dawkins's scientism, see the extract from his 1991 Royal Institution Christmas Lecture quoted in op. cit. note 34, 19–20.

‘flu – this sort of translation might seem feasible.³⁶ Yet most advocates of scientism will find it difficult to see how claims about, say, nature’s historical meanings could be adequately expressed in terms of causal relations and the like.³⁷ Some will draw the conclusion that history and other such disciplines cannot tell us anything worth knowing about the world of hedgehogs, humus and horse chestnuts; some may even doubt whether they can tell us anything at all about how nature really is as opposed to how it merely seems to us.³⁸ Either way, advocates of scientism will see little epistemic value in efforts to reveal nature’s historical, mythic, religious and political meanings.

A related threat to nature’s meaningfulness is the increasing tendency for policymakers to adopt a ‘managerial’ idiom when talking, writing and (presumably) thinking about the natural world. Whether one is considering a Government White Paper on rural affairs, a declaration on sustainability from a private corporation, or the mission statement of an environmental pressure group, one typically encounters the same set of all too familiar references – to the rolling out of strategies, the embedding of commitments, the fixing of objectives, the setting of targets, the estimation of added value, the determination of key performance indicators and the identification of best practice. Such language has its uses of course, and in any case it would be absurd to recommend that managers start trying to write their reports in more evocative, Hughes- or Heaney-esque styles. Be that as it may, the idiom of strategies, objectives, and key performance indicators is a poor vehicle for the communication of nature’s meanings. On the one hand, this is because of the emphasis managerially-minded thinkers place on measurability, as epitomised in the perennial demand that management objectives be SMART (that is, specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely). Talk of values can lend itself to being expressed in such

³⁶ See H. P. Grice, ‘Meaning’, *The Philosophical Review* 66 (1957): 377–88. Not all commentators believe that this sort of translation is feasible. See, for example, Cooper’s discussion of the statement ‘Those clouds mean rain’. This, he contends, is not simply a statement of some regularity or causal connections. Rather, it is in virtue of the appropriateness within a human practice of using clouds as signs of rain that talk of the clouds’ meaning something has its point. See *op. cit.* note 8, 36–7.

³⁷ Most, but not all. A small proportion of those who endorse axiological scientism will be familiar with work in the philosophy of language, and of these a small proportion will subscribe to causal theories of meaning.

³⁸ The latter suggests a commitment to what Stenmark calls ‘epistemic scientism’ (*op. cit.* note 34, 4–5).

Philistinism and the Preservation of Nature

terms (hence the popularity of appeals to ‘added value’ or to the cash value of nature’s ‘services’). However, meanings are hard to quantify and prone, therefore, to being overlooked in discussions that are conducted exclusively in managerial terms. On the other hand, the familiar managerial idiom of strategies, objectives and key performance indicators is simply too bland to convey the meanings of things. As Orwell observed, managerial prose seems to consist ‘less and less of *words* chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of *phrases* tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house.’³⁹ References to the rolling out of strategies, the embedding of commitments and the identification of best practice are simply too insipid to capture the rich variety of political, historical, mythic, religious and personal meanings that people find in the natural world. Hence a devotion to this sort of rhetoric can blind one to nature’s meaningfulness.

Martin Heidegger thought that the rise of scientistic-cum-managerial philistinism was a ‘destining’ (*Geschick*) of history.⁴⁰ In fact he insisted that the greatest ‘danger’ facing us moderns is not that of nuclear war, but the possibility that the ‘calculative thinking’ typically practised by modern advocates of scientism and managerialism ‘may someday come to be accepted and practiced [*sic*] as the only way of thinking’.⁴¹ I do not want to go that far. It is not clear to me that philistinism has permeated all aspects of society. Nonetheless, as commentators such as Frank Furedi have noted, it seems to be spreading, at least in some quarters.⁴² And if this impression is accurate, then nature’s meaningfulness can be preserved. If it is accurate, then the works of men and women such as Mabey, Dillard and Goldsworthy do not merely reveal nature to be generally meaningful; they serve as bulwarks, preserving nature’s meaningfulness against the forces that would destroy it.⁴³

³⁹ ‘Politics and the English Language’, in Orwell, *Essays* (London: Penguin, 1994), 348–359, at 350.

⁴⁰ *Basic Writings*, ed. D. F. Krell (London: Routledge, 1993), 329.

⁴¹ *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. J. M. Anderson and E. H. Freund (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 56 (emphasis removed).

⁴² See further, F. Furedi, *Where Have All the Intellectuals Gone? Confronting 21st Century Philistinism* (London: Continuum, 2004).

⁴³ Talk of ‘bulwarks’ might seem needlessly alarmist. At any rate, it suggests that it is a bad thing, indeed something that there are moral or other sorts of reason to avoid, when people lose their sense of nature’s meaningfulness. Various arguments could be offered in support of this last claim. For example, it could be argued that the members of a philistine society will typically be unable to live truly worthwhile lives. I do not have space, here,

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There have recently been a number of calls for those in disciplines such as fine arts, history and sociology to justify what they do.⁴⁴ The relevant justification is typically economic, the demand being that those who pursue these disciplines explain how their efforts contribute to national economic goals. Recognising that they are unlikely to contribute much to the GDP, fiscally-minded philistines will no doubt have special concerns about the utility of the intellectual and artistic pursuits commended in this paper. What use, they will ask, is environmental history, for instance, or land art? What ends are served by works such as *Landscape and Memory* or *Hidden Trees*? The argument set out above provides one response. It is true that to preserve natural entities one needs people whose work stands a chance of having a quick and direct practical impact. Yet preserving nature's meaningfulness requires the efforts of the sorts of individuals I have mentioned above: not necessarily academics, still less academics belonging to any particular faculty, but men and women like Goldsworthy, Heaney, Dillard, Mabey and Schama – people whose work exemplifies all that is best in the arts, the humanities and the qualitative social sciences.⁴⁵

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to develop this argument. But for an indication as to how it might go, see Peter Goldie's intriguing remarks on the effects of Soviet philistinism in 'Towards a Virtue Theory of Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 47: 4 (2007), 372–87, at 385.

⁴⁴ See further, M. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁴⁵ I would like to thank David E. Cooper, Andy Hamilton, Dawn M. Wilson and Matthew Ratcliffe for the very helpful comments they provided on drafts of this paper.